Michael Trudeau

RESIGNATION

He and Julie are watching a puppy that belongs to their friend Carlos, while Carlos is out of town. They call the puppy Puppy, although Carlos has named it Zoey. But that name is too cute and too cruel for such an ugly thing. It's a sleek black pug whose tail is raised, revealing always its quivering anus, and this disgusts them. It wobbles as it walks, its feet small but still too big for its legs. In the evening he and Julie sit on the couch and laugh admiringly—despite its ugliness—as the puppy flops around the apartment, trying to trot, fumbling sideways as it moves forward.

For three years he and Julie have lived together in the apartment. Lately his melancholy has not been a problem, but it blossoms now and then like a lesion too stubborn to heal. Each time, though, it always ebbs to a more tolerable point, so he's never sought help. He regards the condition curiously, sometimes toying with it.

Yesterday, for instance, after arriving home from his teaching assistantship, he sat down at his desk to work on his novel. But first he checked his email. He scrolled through messages, reading but not replying. There was more junk mail than anything else, and he spent time deleting these. Each minute lost was palpable; the unwritten novel, more vexing than the junk mail, would not give his mind a break. Yet he continued, and soon a part of his brain was wondering if each piece of junk email sent to him was the doing of some conspiratorial government group—the group working hard to keep him from writing anything, such as the novel. A man sat in a room somewhere regarding his computer screen, his progress, the man's finger poised over a button, or a key, ready to email off the next diversion, at which he would bite. In this way and others his life was controlled.

But it was just toying—something like that couldn't be real. And if a conspiracy existed it was ridiculous to assume it was a *government* conspiracy. As if the government were supreme.

And yet he went further. He searched for references on a website that debunked rumors and myths. No record of any rumor that the government sent out junk email to waste writers' time. Next came an Internet search for *junk mail and conspiracy*, and he clicked through three pages of results before stopping. None were relevant. Then came the self-assurance: He was too intelligent to believe all this. And, if there was such a conspiracy, it wouldn't be out there on the Internet anyhow.

He sat back in his chair. He suddenly felt cold, as if he had been cold for a while now and just discovered it. He went to the closet, grabbed a sweatshirt, and pulled it on. Sitting down again, as if he had just forgotten his earlier conclusion he checked for stories in the *New York Times* and then several periodical databases. Soon he wasn't sure what he was looking for anymore, and since he didn't know what he was looking for there were no relevant results.

He sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes so hard for several seconds he saw only splotches laced with teasing remnants of light. Suddenly what he needed, then, was a hot bath. Sitting erect at computer screens all day twisted his nerves and back in a bunch, so how could he be expected to get any work done, such as the novel. He got up from his desk, went to the bathroom, and drew a bath. Back in the bedroom he undressed, retrieved the copy of a seriously long novel he'd been reading for two months, and a towel. He placed an ashtray tubside and brought along his cigarettes, and for the next half hour he soaked in a hot bath, rereading the same ten lines and thinking about the conspiracy.

He was unsure whether to be happy or sad or relieved. He was a mixture of all three. But mostly he was relieved, and while he would not

He woke to Puppy pushing her way through the bathroom door, which he'd left open a crack. She came over, stepped up on a small footstool, and placed her front paws on the wall of the tub. She whined through her flattened nose and wiggled her little body, looking warily at the bathwater. She decided not to leap

have been able to articulate why, it was because the matter of their relationship was now out of his hands.

onto the tub wall completely. For no reason at all this nearly broke his heart, and he smiled and reached out to stroke her head.

The bath had calmed him and he felt more like himself, though the water was getting chilly. He got out. Puppy followed while he dried and dressed. He slipped into the same sweatshirt and jeans and waited, reading the long novel in the armchair by the radiator, for Julie to come home from work. The puppy lay on the ottoman by his feet, looking up at him from time to time as if expecting him to do something.

That evening when Julie came home she announced that she'd been accepted to graduate school, just as he'd been the previous year. She was giddy with disbelief. She had applied only to schools out of state—across the country in fact—and he would not be completing his degree for another two years. He was unsure whether to be happy or sad or relieved. He was a mixture of all three. But mostly he was relieved, and while he would not have been able to articulate why, it was because the matter of their relationship was now out of his hands.

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Today he gets home later than usual, and when he enters the apartment he calls out for the puppy but it doesn't come running. He's come to look forward, a bit, to the way it recklessly tears down the hall and smashes into his shins. He goes to feed it but its food and water bowls are still full. He washes the dishes for five minutes, looking from time to time over his shoulder. Then he searches the apartment, in closets, behind doors, calling the puppy by its real name. Soon he finds it under their bed, lying on its side. He gets down on his stomach and gently drags it out.

"Hey, pal," he says. He's already worried. He sets the puppy on its feet and it takes a step, complains, and drops on its side. It looks up at him and complains again. On the Internet he searches for veterinarians accessible by train. There are only two. It is nearly 6:30 p.m., Julie will be home soon, and so he waits for her. He thinks to call her cell, and intends to call, but for whatever reason does not. Maybe because if she is on her way home on the

train then there is nothing she can do. In the meantime the puppy slinks around and tries to throw up, but it can't throw up. It hacks up yellow gobs of saliva or bile but nothing substantial. He finds more of these gobs, dried, around the apartment and he scrubs them clean.

When Julie arrives she's mad that he didn't take the puppy to the vet immediately.

"Well, I don't know," is all he can manage to say in his defense.

She takes the numbers he has written down and dials the veterinarian. Waiting on the line Julie glares at him, and then shushes him. "Fuck me!" she yells, and he jumps. "They're closed!"

"How are they closed?"

She glares at him again and gets on the Internet. He asks her questions in an innocent voice but she doesn't respond. She dials another number.

"There's a twenty-four-hour emergency vet in Newton," she snips.

Then on the phone with the emergency clinic, Julie describes to someone the puppy's symptoms. It is determined that the puppy could have swallowed something poisonous, but more likely something's obstructing its stomach.

Just then he recalls playing with the puppy last night: he'd been shooting a rubber band across the room—a thick rubber band that had held a bunch of asparagus—and the puppy had been retrieving it. He doesn't mention this.

He asks: "How much would something like that cost?"

Julie repeats the question into the phone.

The person on the line explains that twenty-four-hour emergency clinics are expensive—they need to be able to stay open twenty-four hours—and that she prefers not to quote prices, because quoting a price might keep them from bringing the puppy in. Finally the person gives a ballpark estimate, and Julie hangs up.

"She's saying anywhere from fifteen hundred to five thousand, depending on X-rays and surgery."

"Fucking ridiculous."

He sits down at the table and Julie slumps on the couch. They both look at the puppy who has lain under the kitchen table. It appears to be sleeping.

"Maybe she'll be all right."

"Carlos is gonna kill us."

"If she could only barf up whatever it is."

“Maybe she’ll barf it up tonight.”

And a little later:

“I don’t think Carlos would pay five grand, do you?”

They decide he wouldn’t.

They set the alarm an hour early for the next morning, and Julie will take the puppy to the regular vet, accessible by train, on her way to work. Before going to sleep they set the puppy in a comfortable chair at the foot of their bed.

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In the morning the puppy is gone. Soon they find it in the six-inch space beneath the porcelain bathtub.

“Carlos is going to hate us forever,” Julie says. She says it airily, childishly, perhaps because she has just gotten up—she says it as if they were watching a movie in which a puppy had been found dead under a tub. He resents her for being so vapid.

In his underwear he goes prone on the chilly bathroom tile and fishes it out with a broom. With the bristles end he is able to push it up against the wall and then slide it toward him along the wall. Neither knows what to do with a dead animal. Julie gets a plastic shopping bag and rubber gloves from under the kitchen sink.

Julie holds open the bag. Its body is not yet hard, as he had worried it might be, and it still smells like a puppy, downy and sweetly stinky, but he uses the gloves anyway. Only last night he was holding it and petting its tiny head, and now he’s using gloves. He can feel its delicate bones through the thin rubber and wishes he had scooped it up with a dustpan or used tongs, but that wouldn’t have been right. He lays the puppy in the plastic bag and moves to tie the bag but decides not to. The bag’s two handles point straight up in the air.

After that they don’t know what to do with it and panic. It’s already seven thirty.

“I can’t miss work.”

“Well, I can’t either.”

They place it outside the bathroom door to complete their morning routines.

On their way out of the apartment he glances at the bag at the end of the empty hallway, which now seems very long. The bag looks too lonely to stay

there for nine hours. “Hold on, Julie,” he says. He walks over, gently picks up the bag, and moves it into the bathtub. Before setting it down, with his palm he wipes away the beads of moisture left from their showers.

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Last night, after Julie told him she had been accepted to graduate school, they had a perfunctory talk about their future. They sat on the couch as the puppy trotted around and slipped on the kitchen’s linoleum. After a while the puppy came over and gnawed on the rubber toe of his shoe, and they watched it absently. There was no talk of one person limiting the other person, or of one person not loving the other person truly. They felt above those things. The consensus was that this change would be good for both of them. The sad part for both was that neither disagreed—but they didn’t mention this. For him, sitting on the couch regarding the conversation as it happened, a feeling began to take shape in him that something was slipping away. A moment. An opportunity. If he were to spring the length of the couch and grab Julie around the knees it would stop. He would tell her they should stay together no matter what, he would tell her that he would go with her, he would tell her don’t go, and the feeling would stop.

During this he also watched the puppy. He prodded its gnawing teeth with his shoe as Julie talked. He had speculated in the past that he was merely a spectator of his life, and he thought that again while sitting on the couch. But he quickly dismissed that idea as nonsense. He wasn’t a spectator, and never had been. He’d always tried to make objective, informed decisions. And this time he was making an informed decision based on his feelings, and so was Julie. Besides, both agreed they didn’t need to be decisive at the moment. There was no hurry. Their lease would be up at the same time Julie planned to be heading to school anyway, in about five months. They would see what happened, and in the meantime things would stay as they were.

After the talk they cooked dinner and were very cordial with each another. He would ask politely for the chef knife and Julie would drop everything to pass it to him. He would do the same when she asked him to reach the olive oil. They would bump elbows, say sorry, smile briefly, and reply that it was not a problem. Though over the meal itself they said little.

Afterward Julie went to the bedroom to call her mother and tell her the

good news. He could hear her muffled voice through the wall, how it rose with excitement describing her new school, new scholarship, and the new city she'd be living in. He pictured Julie lying prone on their bed like a teenager—phone pressed against her ear, knees bent, legs in the air and crossed at the ankles. He moved from the kitchen into the living room but could still hear her through the wall.

The puppy was playing tug of war with the skirt on the ottoman.

He'd take it for a walk.

They had lived in the neighborhood for three years, but he'd never explored it. As a result he knew only the streets necessary to go from point A to B. So at the first intersection he decided to take a right where he usually would have taken a left, and soon he was surprised to come upon a small park, not three blocks from their apartment. He felt slightly betrayed. Julie was a runner, he was not, and she would have known about the park, but as far as he could remember she had never mentioned it. He passed it by. Here, homes stood in place of the apartment buildings he was used to. Past these homes were larger homes, and then even larger ones. Looking at these he could not help but think about commitment and love, and similar dilemmas. The situation with Julie that was now unfolding seemed cyclical to him, and he was unsurprised. A little more than three years ago his previous long-term relationship had fizzled, and prior to that another had gone the same way—in each case with hardly a protest from any party. It was likely that he'd gone for a walk like this both times to contemplate what had happened and how odd it was that it was happening.

The puppy stopped to shit on the boulevard and he waited. He conceded that maybe the puppy wasn't completely ugly, but he still would never want to own a pet like this. He had known Carlos to talk to it in baby tones and in conversational tones. He imagined that while alone with the puppy, Carlos would speak to it as if it were a person. It was something he'd tried to do himself for the past few days, to speak to it like a person, but the feeling had been too awkward—his words had seemed to hang in the air, each new word a test, and this only accentuated the fact that there would be no response.

But as he and the puppy began to trudge up a hill,

The puppy finished, trotted over to his side, and they continued their walk.

Over the years all of his relationships

the street lined now with mansions, a small part of his brain began to tell him that the problem—if he had a problem—was one of faith. Which perhaps he lacked and had never possessed.

with women had been at least as fulfilling and as natural, he believed, as the relationships his friends were having, even those that had resulted in marriage. Surely he hadn't done anything wrong in his. But as he and the puppy began to trudge up a hill, the street lined now with mansions, a small part of his brain began to tell him that the problem—if he had a problem—was one of faith. Which perhaps he lacked and had never possessed.

As he walked, he noticed the neighborhood was dark and lonely. Did no one keep their house lights on in this neighborhood, he wondered—and then the small part of his brain began to expand. There you go again, he thought, toying with it. But a block and a half later, this small part was no longer small and had grown to fill the exact volume of his brain.

The neighborhood grew graver still, and his future more bleak. Here it should be pointed out that during his walk with the puppy there was a world floating on the periphery of his internal vision, and it had been present, or present in its absence, for many years, popping up the first time several years earlier in a moment of similar despair. If life is a stage then he must describe the world as offstage. One could never look at it directly, could never catch sight of it, since it would move in unison with the eyes. And that detail filled him with dread: He could never regard that world, and so he did not know and could never know if it were a better world or no better. If only, it had occurred to him twice before in his life, you simply believed in it, that that world was good, then things would be okay.

Both times when this thought had occurred to him he felt on the cusp of something very important, though he would not have been able to articulate what. His heart had welled up, his breath caught in his chest, and the periphery world began to thrum, to expand. A coming into sight, and a coming into life, that was perhaps within grasp. The inhabitants of this world—in position to bear witness, whoever or whatever they may have been—thrummed as well, began to gasp, in hope, awe, of a faith of his that was becoming. All would be real if he were to will it.

And at this point, on the very verge, both times he had turned away. The world halted. It ceased to thrum. The collective voice of its inhabitants came muted and fading, registering disappointment, and the world quickly receded. It was zipped up quietly to wait inside him.

He shook his head now. Just thinking of it had made his heart beat faster and made that peripheral world begin to pulse. He would not go there tonight, could not let that dread happen again, an experience some people might call what?—he wouldn't say it.

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Julie is able to leave work early and she arrives at the apartment soon after he does. While at work she has called the vet, who will stay until five thirty to accept the remains. Their friend Carlos did not leave a pet carrier for the puppy, and so he is searching the bedroom for something appropriate. He has already found two flattened cardboard boxes behind the couch, but they have no packaging tape. They decide on a rolling suitcase, and Julie lifts up the bed a few inches for him to pull the suitcase out. The shopping bag is in the tub where he left it that morning, and in the bathroom Julie unzips the suitcase as he lifts the shopping bag and places it inside, thinking that the bag weighs less than their typical bag of groceries. They wheel the suitcase a block and a half to the train platform and wait. It is cold and growing dark and he and Julie stand there, holding hands like always, watching boys and girls, roughly their age but a few years younger, enter and exit the liquor store across the street. A store employee is loading a keg into the backseat of a car.

"We're too old for this neighborhood," Julie says. She pulls out a cigarette even though they spot the train a bit off. She lights it, they share a few puffs, and then the train is there.

That night the train is dead save for a handful of passengers. He and Julie exit the car alone at Park Street. He tows the suitcase. As they near the hub's entryway Julie reaches out to hold the door but before she can do so it opens for her from outside. She steps out and he follows. They say thank you and glance in turn at the homeless man's cup, which is leveled in their path, and then at his face. They pass and the homeless man releases the door.

When he thinks back on that face he gives it a name, and the name he gives is that of a well-liked homeless man who lived in his hometown. Mr. Jim

they called him. Although the real Mr. Jim was kind and had a kind face, he calls it that anyway.

His eyes are on the back of Julie's coat as she looks both ways for the street on which they'll find the veterinarian. He is thinking about her, and them, and something like the elusiveness of knowing one simple thing, when there is a tug at the suitcase. Knowing already that it is the homeless man, his mouth begins to form the uneasy smile he gives at homeless men's tired attempts for coins. He turns. In place of the white plastic cup there is a small serrated blade, it looks like a steak knife, which he can barely see in the dark. His eyes move from the knife to the homeless man's face. He stands there on the sidewalk and can hear only the blood rushing through his veins. He is not scared of the knife or the man holding it but the small part of his brain now growing larger that tells him this moment is meant to be.

"Tell this pussy to let go the case," Mr. Jim says to Julie while looking him in the eye.

He stands and stares.

"Let go of the suitcase, Michael," Julie says gently, and she tugs his other arm.

He obeys. He sets the suitcase upright and releases the handle. Mr. Jim takes the handle, rotates the suitcase ninety degrees, and wheels it to the curb. Then he steps off and into downtown traffic. From behind they see him tuck the knife into his jacket pocket as if it were a set of car keys. Looking side to side he crosses the street diagonally against traffic, and three cars must slow to let him pass in their headlights. He gains the other side, the suitcase wheels bump over the curb, and he enters an alleyway.

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